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ABSTRACT

Conceding that there has been some insufficient sensitivity to the existence of women in the semantic choices of traditional English Grammar, this paper contends that the new feminist grammars confuse language with sexual politics. Issues discussed in the paper include the generic masculine occupation words; the prefix titling system (covering Ms., Miss as a career title, Mme. with foreign women, and Master with boys); the girl/man pair; the feminine as a gender of animation, including a suggestion as to why it does not appear in children's books; and the masculine as a common gender. The paper argues that guidelines such as those of the National Council of Teachers of English, which call for the avoidance of sexist language, arbitrarily limit writers' resources without resolving the real issues in sexual politics. (Author/FL)

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A Critique of the New Feminist Grammar

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by Edmund Miller

[An earlier, shorter version of this paper under the title "Sex and Grammar" was read at the 1979 Convention of the Council on College Composition and Communication, Minneapolis, April 7, 1979.]

There have certainly been many occasions when the careless writers of the ages and of our own age have produced English insufficiently sensitive to the very existence of women. But discussions of sexist language are often strangely wide of the mark.

The kind of material that does, in fact, require the attention of monitors of sexist language and perhaps their outrage is of the sort cited by Julia Stanley in illustration of male semantic space in English in the N.C.T.E. book on Sexism and Language. The usage to be avoided occurs when a writer begins by using generically words marked for masculine gender but then as he proceeds forgets that he was doing so and shifts to language which cannot be interpreted to include women. For example, this from Erving Goffman's Encounters: "For the merry-go-round rider, for example, the self awaiting is one that entails a child's portion of bravery and muscular control, a child's portion of manliness." Or this from Feiffer's Album:

First Satirist: A satirist can't teach people
anything if he offends them.

Second Satirist: I offend them. They love it.
I make fun of their wives.¹

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However, much of what has been written about sexist language and most of what has created the ill feelings in the air are usages having little to do with such clear-cut cases for consciousness raising. In fact, in speech the chief result of the raising of society's consciousness about sexist language has been a self-conscious disruption of the flow of thought with everyone stopping to recast sentences with the fashionable jargon but seldom to rethink deep-rooted values. Likewise in writing, we see an increase in barbarism and jargon, things with which we were only too plentifully supplied already, but no changes in subject matter or attitude.

And even writers on the very subject of sexist language sometimes seem to lose sight of the main issue and take a perverse delight in writing women out of history. The comments of Ann Bodine on the 1850 Act of Parliament which replaced he or she with generic he in the language of Parliament are a case in point. The act in fact insured that women would be covered by laws in which they were not specifically mentioned. So a legal protection was being accorded women by the adoption of generic he. All that Ann Bodine can notice, however, is that the pronoun she was not granted generic status.²

The fact that we must try to keep in sight is that grammatical gender is not sexual gender. Rules of grammar, in fact, tell us nothing about the relations of the sexes. Turkish, for example, has the much-wished-for common-gender third-person pronoun. But rash indeed would be the commentator who supposed on the basis of this fact that the harem girls of the Ottoman Empire led lives of greater dignity than the women professors of modern American universities, who must suffer the lack of such a pronoun.

One clear index of the unfortunate self-consciousness that has been generated by the current attention to sexist language is that much of the complaining is at cross-purposes. On the one hand we find writers decrying the apparent absence of women from discussions that use generic man and compound words with the suffix -man or generic he. The reasoning is that if a writer talks about policemen or postmen or chairmen or statesmen or fishermen he is not allowing for the fact that these roles are now open to women.³ We see this, but on the other hand we also see forms like poetess and lady lawyer deplored as calling irrelevant attention to sex.⁴ This second complaint is closer to the mark. It is undoubtedly true that at some time in history policeman and postman and most of the other -man words (though not of course the word woman) could, it was thought, apply only to men because they did apply only to men. But women had been serving as chairmen for a long time before anyone noticed there was a linguistic anomaly afoot. I do not see that any women's rights issue is moved forward by insulting the memory of such women now.

Similarly at cross-purposes are the fact that the common prefix titling system for women is different from the system for men and the solution proposed with the neologism Ms. The problem was felt to be that women are dinigrated by being forced to reveal their marital status in situations where men do not reveal theirs; women are treated as inferiors because they do not have a single universally applicable prefix title the way men do. The introduction of the new title Ms has, however, not eliminated the old titles. And there are now three common titles for women, marking women as, if anything, more inferior to men than they were before.

There is also a new confusion about the titling of women. (If separate were always unequal, then of course the thing to do would be to grant the prestige title Mr. to everyone. I have not known anyone to advocate this.) It was the announced intent of the editors of Ms. to invent a new title. They succeeded only too well in devising a title with the sort of invented and new-fangled look that gives offence to so many people, a point that is indeed conceded by more than one writer cautioning against indiscriminate use of Ms to refer to such people, for example, as a friend's grandmother.⁵ A belated discovery of Ms in secretarial handbooks as an expedience title for women of unknown status has not changed the unnatural appearance of the word. Nor has the discovery that Ms occurs on a few early American tombstones as an abbreviation of expediency for mistress, which someone reading such a tombstone was undoubtedly expected to pronounce in full. But Ms was introduced not as an expediency for use when knowledge or space is inadequate but as a prefix title for general use. And as such it arrived most unhappily without an established pronunciation. I have not heard mistress urged as the proper pronunciation, even by the most vocal advocates of the historical precedent provided by the tombstones. Most people simply spell the title out when they come across it in their reading--on analogy with U.N. and N.C.T.E. If the pronunciation [mIz] is used, the disadvantages of the new title only increase since this is a Southern dialect pronunciation of Mrs.⁶

Apart from the problem of pronunciation and on its own ground of utility, the title Ms was a mistake because it is simply not true that women are forced by the titling system to reveal their full marital

status. Of course historically Mrs. was a title of rank indicating nothing about marital status. But even today a widowed or divorced woman, though unmarried, is as much a Mrs. as any wife. And not all Miss's are unmarried. Many career women--many academic women--continue to use a maiden name and the title Miss though happily (or unhappily) married in private life. Miss has, in fact, established usage as a career title on a fairly wide scale, though it was never, of course, universally used. But how much better to attempt to expand this established usage than to introduce a strange new term.

However, there is something else which it is important to point out about the use of Miss as a career title without reference to marital status, something which has not been mentioned in any of the literature: the title Miss has been not only available and used by some career women; it was actually part of the public consciousness in this sense--because it was the only title ever used for movie stars.⁷ No matter how many times Ginger Rogers or Elizabeth Taylor married, the only title ever used for her was Miss. Even more indicative of fixed popular understanding of Miss as the proper title for a woman acting on her own in the world regardless of marital status is the fact that actresses who acquire their professional surnames through marriage are still always called Miss. This is the case with Cyd Charisse, Raquel Welch, Ellen Burstyn, Stockard Channing, and Cheryl Ladd, for example. Agatha Christie was treated in a similar fashion before she was knighted. This represents a natural change that has occurred in language usage, since until the early part of this century even actresses did not have names of their own--Mrs. Siddons, Mrs. Patrick Campbell.

The title Ms has met with considerable opposition and been subject to both comic and vitriolic attack. The title Miss could have met with no such opposition, and had it been advocated for general use among career women and all women when acting on their own in the world, it would have had the distinct advantage of already existing not only as a prefix title but as a title for the circumstances at issue.

The old titling system does in fact have a gap in it, though this gap is not filled by the title Ms. While in popular usage, a married woman acting on her own often uses the title Mrs. together with her own given name and the surname acquired through marriage (Mrs. Mary Smith), this usage is of course deplored by the etiquette books and not used in choice style. Mrs. in the most careful modern English usage must be followed by a man's name and means something very like "the wife of the man I am about to mention." Thus a divorced woman must invent a pseudo-man by replacing the given name of the husband she has lost with her maiden name (Mrs. Brown Smith). And thus unlike Miss, Mrs. is not used by itself in direct address. It is because Mrs. is this sort of reference title and not an honorific like Mr. and Miss that it can be used unself-consciously in literary and historical studies for reference to women who are long dead--Mrs. Wolfe, Mrs. Browning--whereas the titles Mr. and Miss are only available for the living or recently deceased. A literary reference to Miss Dickinson or Miss Rossetti, to Mr. Shakespeare or Mr. Dickens is simply ludicrous.⁸

The use of Mrs. in the English language is somewhat special since the titles in the Romance Languages that are seemingly parallel are not used in the same way. M^{me} is used in French as a prefix title both with a woman's own given name and with her husband's. It is also used like Miss in English with the names of movie stars. And it is a title of address as well as a prefix title. While French thus provides

the married woman the prefix title for acting on her own in the world that the American woman lacks, it falls short of feminist perfection in other ways. In French an envelope is addressed "M. Pierre Curie et Madame," as if we were to emphasize the appendage nature of the woman by saying in English "Mr. Arthur Bell Nicholls and wife." The Spanish go to just the other extreme and never use the title Sra with the husband's given name. A woman acquires a surname through marriage, but she uses this with her own given name. On the other hand, both because there is no *Sra Juán Lopez and because of the matrinyimic system, addressing an envelope to a couple in Spanish can be quite an elaborate affair.⁹

The problem for English is that the modern world gives married women frequent opportunities to act on their own apart from their husbands, and they need a prefix title for when they acting in this way. I suppose Ms could fill this gap. But, the fact is ordinary married woman are clearly not using the title in this way and are clinging very tightly to the title Mrs. even when they defy the etiquette books about its proper use.

Sometimes the internal confusions in complaints about sexist language are such that we lose track of exactly what the complaint is. Mary Richie Key, for example, deplores a reference to Queen Elizabeth I of England as a "true prince."¹⁰ But clearly such usage should be applauded specifically for being non-sexist. While the word prince is a pair word for princess as a title for a member of a royal family or for the ruler of a principality, it is being used in a different, larger sense here for a ruler of authority, justice, and nobility or character. Henry VIII, perhaps not so true a prince as his daughter, was no more than she the ruler of a mere principality. But he was one of the European princes, to use the word in yet another sense. So too Queen

Elizabeth. To say that she was a "true princess" would be to change and limit the intended meaning--and to raise other psychological and genealogical questions. To say that since Elizabeth was a woman we must call her a ruler and not a prince is to circumscribe irrationally the resources of language. Mary Richie Key also cites as ludicrous the fact that Pearl Bailey received a Man of the Year award. There would be far greater cause for complaint if she had been ruled ineligible by reason of her sex. Nor is it absurd that a state law reads,

No person may require another person to perform,
participate in, or undergo an abortion of
pregnancy against his will.¹¹

While the principal is always a woman in an abortion case, a law like this one that said "against her will" would have a much narrower scope and could not be used against someone forcing a male doctor to perform a (voluntary) abortion at gunpoint--though such wording would still make culpable someone forcing a female doctor to do the same thing.

Languages that have grammatical gender concord, always do have some truly anomalous situations requiring compromise by the application of arbitrary rules. But no legitimate purpose is served by pretending that similar difficulties exist in English when they do not. On the other hand, the sweeping statement that there is no grammatical gender in English is also false, especially when it is the first premise in an attack on the traditional gender concord for the indefinite pronouns.

The languages that have more frequent occasion than English to resolve questions of gender concord deal with the issue in diverse

ways. French with its conservatism and concern for the purity of the language is not especially troubled by what contradictions arise between natural gender and grammatical gender. This is not to say that the speaker of French is unaware of such contradictions. The classic crux of French gender concord is "Le professeur est enciente" 'The [masc.] teacher [masc.] is pregnant'. In fact, in actual spoken French a rhetorical device premitted by the grammar of the language would almost certainly be invoked to soften the blow of contradiction in the gender concord. The French speaker would probably say, "Le professeur, elle est enciente" 'The [masc.] teacher [masc.]--she is pregnant'. In French this structure is not the illicit redundancy it is in English but a perfectly acceptable sentence pattern. But the interesting point to notice for our purposes is that it does not resolve the gender incongruity; it merely shifts it from a question of concord between subject and complement to a question of concord between subject, or subject of intent, and a following pronoun in apposition, or real subject.¹² Another sentence illustrating contradiction between natural gender and grammatical gender in French is "La recrue a une belle moustache" 'The [fem.] recruit [fem.] has an attractive moustache'. It is interesting that with recrue, like sentinelle, an old established word feminine in gender but traditionally having reference to a man, gender concord takes clear precedence over the logic of natural gender not only for adherent adjectives but even for predicate adjectives, which it does not for the masculine occupation words now newly applicable to women as well as men. In English, of course, such issues cannot arise, not because we have no grammatical gender but because we have no adjective concord.

The Dutch language, like the German and despite the fact that they are sister languages to English, has gender problems that do not arise in the limited concord system of English. Several basic words for women in Dutch, for example, are neuter in gender: zuster 'sister', vrouw 'woman/wife'. Very sensibly, it seems to the English point of view, natural gender is used for pronoun references to these words. What Dutch has done with such words is to make gender concord for them a rhetorical rather than a grammatical question. In German, on the other hand, where such words are also neuter, they require neuter pronouns for reference. But Dutch has not been able to shift the entire burden of gender concord from grammar to rhetoric. Since Dutch grammatical gender concord concerns the two gender classes common and neuter, the problem of the sort of occupation words we have already discussed in English would seem to have been of a less serious nature than it is in German, Russian, Greek, and the Romance languages, where masculine and feminine are separate concord classes. However, Dutch has chosen to ignore the simplicity of its grammar on this point. Though the masculine and feminine personal pronouns might well have been used indifferently according to the dictates of natural gender with these occupation words, in fact Dutch rhetoric insists on special feminine forms for the occupation words. In Dutch, bookkeepers, violinists, lawyers, students, secretaries, editors, and, yes, chairmen must forever announce their sex. This is also true of Italian and Spanish. And some commentators on sexist language seem to wish to introduce this needless complication into English. It is true that English has some special feminine forms already, but the difference is that Dutch, Italian, and Spanish have no common forms applicable without

self-consciousness to either sex--at least in the singular. Such a system can work fairly well in the two Romance languages (though it is not required--French does not use it), but such a system frequently encounters practical difficulties in Dutch as it would in an Germanic language because a feminine ending is not automatically at hand every time a woman enters a new profession. We must say, "Mijn vrouw is meester in de rechten" 'My wife is an L.L.D. [masc.]'. Of course even in the Romance Languages where the appropriate endings are readily available, this system does raise the question in sexual politics of whether women are really being conceded to be doing the same work as men. The difficulty arose naturally in Dutch. The solution arose naturally in Italian. But it hardly seems appropriate to force language to raise such questions about the capacities of women just at this time, yet this is exactly what Julia Stanley, for one, wishes to do.¹³

And in the plural such a system breaks down entirely--for Italian and Spanish quite as much as for Dutch. When there is a need to speak of a group of mixed sexes--or genders, when sex is not even an issue--the speaker in Moscow or Madrid, in Paris, Athens, or Agra naturally follows the general Indo-European rule and uses the masculine plural for such a mixed group. This is, of course, a closed grammatical question in all the Indo-European languages that retain grammatical gender (even to a limited extent as in English).¹⁴ No amount of consciousness raising is going to disturb this grammatical settlement even if Brown University does now insist with barbarous anachronism that it has an Alumni/Alumnae Chair of English. For convenience' sake there must be some rule. This is the one Indo-European happens to have.

It would be folly for English speakers to redefine occupation words to exclude women just now when women are expanding their occupational horizons. Yet this is exactly the implication of a form like chairperson. It says the user thinks women cannot make satisfactory chairmen, and it says it in contradiction to established usage. To insist on a term like chair or head for the person presiding in the chair carries the same implication and merely cloaks it in jargon rather than barbarism. And if we pursue the fashion of interpreting English occupation titles with -man in them as inapplicable to women, we shall only resurrect the spectre of grammatical gender in English and face ourselves with the plural dilemma of the Romance Languages. If we then settle for the Indo-European solution to this problem, we will be giving a new impetus to masculine domination if only in the grammatical sense.

Another front on which the battle against sexist language has been waged is concern over the use of the term girl to refer to women of mature years. While the usage is certainly sometimes a way of dismissing or overlooking, whether consciously or unconsciously, the contributions of women, much of the verbiage on the subject has been produced under the mistaken impression that men of mature years are called men in contexts similar to those in which women of mature years are called girls.¹⁵ In fact this is not always so. In many of the contexts about which we are talking, men are called fellows. We would talk about "the new fellow in the office" or "the fellow who's going to be the boss's new assistant" if the person were a man. The parallel term to fellow for women established over the years for such contexts is girl. Perhaps it is unfortunate that this is the same word we use for female children,

but it is unambiguous in context since on one is ever misled into thinking that female children are being referred to.

I do not know what to suggest about the girls in the office problem. Obviously consciousness has been raised only selectively if the fellow/girl pair has not been noticed and the casual assumption is made that a man/girl pair is implied when it is not. The fellow/girl pair, by the way, seems to have a slang form guy/gal. Introducing this into more general contexts might be a way of circumventing the difficulties, but to my ear gal is worse than girl, more dismissive. And guy is achieving some currency as a sex-neutral term. This is the old masculine-as-common gender reality that upsets some people so about the -man words.

It is perhaps salutary to remember that natural language sets no criterion of equal opportunity. The French have separate words for boy 'fils' and son 'garçon', but the same word 'fille' has to do double duty for girl and daughter. A female child is regularly called "jeune fille" 'young daughter' to clarify the distinction (myth has it that we also make it clear that we do not mean fille de joie 'prostitute'). In English a boy's mail is addressed with the prefix title Master until he begins answering it himself, but a new-born baby girl is immediately entitled to be addressed as Miss. And English also seems to find it necessary to borrow the French M^{me} as a title for the wives of distinguished foreign men but allows the men themselves to make do with Mr.: M^{me} Onassis, M^{me} De Gaulle, M^{me} Marcos, M^{me} Chiang Kai-shek. History tells us that any attempt to impose order on language inevitably multiplies incongruities.

Another battle front concerns choice of pronouns with antecedents that are not sex-specific. The natural gender of Modern English perhaps obscures the fact that pronoun choice is always a question of grammar not politics. But the seventeenth-century development of its as a possessive of it--his had previously done double duty, serving for neuter as well as for masculine and common--does not change the facts of how language works.

There are actually several different kinds of structures in which personal pronouns are found without sex-specific antecedents. The use of the masculine pronoun in a variety of different situations has been misconstrued as a single political statement, and consequently several different types of confusion of grammar and politics are at issue. There are sentences including indefinite pronouns, for example

When everyone had taken his place, the ceremony began written of a mixed group. The antecedent here is grammatically ambiguous, though the sex of the various persons referred to is known to the writer. The masculine pronoun refers in turn to several persons of both sexes. A similar grammatical situation arises with disjunctive conjunctions, for example

* Either John or Mary has forgotten to pick up his supplies for next week,

meaning that the supplies belong either to Mary or John--the writer does not know which. The most careful writers, however, would undoubtedly recast sentences of this second sort to avoid pronoun use entirely:

Either John or Mary has forgotten to pick up supplies for next week.

In speech plural reference words are quite regularly used for both of these common gender situations. But his or her, her or his, and her alone (for mixed groups) occur only in the fantasies of the wilder theoreticians. They have no existence in the spoken language, except in situations of strained self-consciousness about sexual politics, when the various members of a common class are spoken of in the singular.

But sentences like

The person who committed this crime, whoever he is,
must be out of his mind

are of a different order. The antecedent is not ambiguous since some specific person is referred to. The gender of the antecedent is merely unknown to the writer. In speech, plural pronouns are common for this sort of situation, but he or she occurs as well. Surprisingly, however, the common use of the masculine is also frequently heard, perhaps more regularly than with ambiguous antecedents. This is probably because sentences about antecedents of unknown gender are very rare and have an air of formal mystery about them that encourages speakers to search more consciously in the resources of language for the best form.

A housewife's sentence characterizing an oven.

She's on the blink again

is of yet another type. Such usage ascribes gender metaphorically to something that has no regular grammatical gender. This highly literary device is common in the speech of people at all social levels. And

there is little disagreement about which pronoun to use. Except among certain self-conscious feminists and (for reasons less apparent) many authors of alphabet books and beginning readers, the feminine serves as a gender of animation.¹⁶ It is available for such use only because English does not have mandatory gender concord.

Of the various usages, this last of ascribed gender is the easiest to understand. It should be distinguished from another literary tradition also involving conscious pretense--personification. This tradition, which probably never had much occurrence in speech and now has almost none, makes recourse to the gender identifications of Greek mythology. About the only vestige of native Saxon mythology is the idea of a man in the moon. And even so the moon is usually feminine in the Greek way in romantic contexts. Among the more common conventions that still occur in poetry, Death is masculine; the Soul is feminine. By a more general agreement, countries are feminine, so a sentence like the following might occur in a news magazine:

The South has come into her own in the seventies.

And the use of the masculine pronoun for references to God should be accounted part of this tradition--a convention firmly rooted in popular consciousness. But most of the conventions of this tradition are not part of popular culture, and the full range of the tradition is a development of English literature after the grammatical gender of Old English had been lost and after the native mythology of the Angles and Saxons had been forgotten.¹⁷

But in parallel with this development, popular culture also created a way of making poetic use of the disappearance of

mandatory gender concord. Spontaneous animations are indulged in by people in all walks of life every day. The gender ascribed to inanimate things for the nonce in this way is almost always feminine.¹⁸ The reason for this is that feminine gender (in distinction from female sexuality) is the gender of animation in English. In other words, it has been developed in the popular imagination by the body of speakers over the centuries as a way of bringing inanimate things to life for a moment. No implication that women are not living things is intended--just as the common gender use of masculine pronouns does not cast doubts on the sexual identity of men. And it is also neither sensuousness nor unpredictability in the things animated that leads people to choose unerringly the feminine pronoun to refer to ships, and cars, and hurricanes. That is folk explanation after the fact. Of course the feminine gender did not become available as a gender of animation until after the loss of grammatical gender. But it was perhaps available precisely because the masculine gender was already doing double duty as a common gender.

With the facts of usage in mind, the authors of children's books may perhaps be forgiven for making less use of the convention of animation than they do, for the mythology of basic readers requires not nonce animations (transient feminines) but personifications (actual characters who speak through things). Naturally unwilling to expect a knowledge of the literary conventions of Greek mythology in their audience, they are probably in the habit of falling back on the traditional division of labor in making many of their gender decisions. Since the division of labor itself is changing in society, we would expect some increase in the occurrence of feminine personifications even without the recent growth of feminist political consciousness.

On the other hand, the new system of giving hurricanes men's as well as women's names, obviously a response to political feminism, runs counter to the natural tendencies of usage. The new policy will probably mean that in practice all people will continue to use feminine pronouns for hurricanes with women's names but that less competent speakers will twitter self-consciously over pronoun choice when faced with a hurricane that has been assigned a man's name. It may even be that hurricanes assigned masculine names will come to seem less damaging and terrible. As lively natural phenomena, all hurricanes are properly it's. They become metaphoric he's when seemingly strong, purposeful, and self-directed. But since animation without true literary personification is produced in English with the feminine pronoun, we may find ourselves hesitant to assert this self-direction of the hurricanes that happen to be given masculine names, for only the very formal traditionalists who say,

Everyone get back into his seat!

are going to master the concord

Hurricane David did her best to wash way the dunes.

And we should note that it is the will-power and not the destructiveness that makes us feel the need to use the gender of animation so frequently with hurricanes. No reference to female destructiveness was intended in the first place, and the whole thrust of the feminist critique of hurricane names was radically unsound. A glacier is more destructive than a hurricane, but since the pace of its devastation allows man to get out of its way, we do not feel a pressing need

for metaphor. On the whole the gender of animation probably occurs far more often in contexts of affection than of terror. But with the hurricane it is power and self-direction (surely traditional male attributes in the human sexual arena) that produce the popular rhetorical tradition of ascribing the feminine pronoun, a tradition than antedates by centuries and in fact gave rise to the recent convention of assigning actual women's names to hurricanes. The pronoun she merely illustrates the animation we feel in this force of nature. This happens whether the storm has a name or not. But if we are going to assign names, it is surely only sensible that they should conform to the conventions of language. The men's names do not, and so they can no more influence pronoun choice than George Eliot's name does in critical discussions of her work.

Dorothy Sayers nicely sums up the popular usage of the gender of animation in this passage from The Nine Tailors:

"Jack has the honour of ringing the oldest bell we have," added the Rector. "Batty Thomas was cast in 1338 by Thomas Belleytere of Lynn; but she gets her name from Abbot Thomas who re-cast her in 1380-- doesn't she, Jack?"

"So she do, sir," agreed Mr. Godfrey. Bells, it may be noted, like ships and kittens, have a way of being female, whatever names they are given.¹⁹

The genuine pronoun problem area, however, is clearly sentences involving antecedent indefinite pronouns like everyone when all possible antecedents are not of a single sex. As we have seen, sentences of two radically distinct types are involved. It is important

to distinguish between antecedents of ambiguous gender and those of unknown gender. For certainly it is an over-simplification to dismiss as stylistic crudities all uses of double-barreled pronouns like he or she, as do some of the traditional, prescriptive grammar books. Though such pronouns can certainly be cumbersome on occasion, they can also on occasion be quite meaningful. Two passages from the novel The Last of Philip Banter by John Franklin Bardin illustrate the critical difference between ambiguous and unknown antecedents.

Philip is speaking (he thinks that he may be writing an unsettling autobiography during periods of drunkenness or insanity); he says: "I intended to sit and wait for whoever was writing the manuscript, if anyone was. I wanted to catch him--or her--red-handed."²⁰ This is an example of unknown antecedent and a perfectly reasonable use of a double-barreled pronoun. The pronoun is punctuated in the book with two dashes. But whether it is so punctuated or not, we always speak this sort of pronoun with pauses: "He--or she--will be discovered and hanged at last." We do this to make clear that we are indeed using the common gender and not the masculine, from which it is indistinguishable. Unfortunately for theories of sexual equality this means that the feminine pronoun may appear only as the afterthought. And it invariably does so appear. Since the feminine pronoun never occurs in natural speech as a common gender form, it would be meaningless to start with it.

The second passage from Bardin runs as follows: "Philip was as shocked to see Brent [which is a woman's name in this case] as Brent was to see Philip. They stood for a moment, each on his side of the threshold, frozen with consternation."²¹ Some would argue that this is

ludicrous, a violation of natural gender. In fact, it is simply an illustration of the way the careful writer of choice prose does in fact invoke the masculine as a common gender. To write "each on his or her side of the threshold" would be to make the sentence about sexual confrontation when it is merely about surprise. And nothing would be gained in clarity--a great deal, indeed, would be lost--by saying "each on his/her side of the threshold" in a case like this. If anyone is troubled by this sort of sentence in the form that Bardin originally wrote it, he is free to recast--in his own writing--and say something like "They faced each other on opposite sides of the threshold, frozen with consternation." It is not reasonable, however, to demand that others recast their sentences in unison.²² Such a requirement needlessly hobbles the resources of language, and it is based on a completely unsound understanding of the relationship between language and sexual politics.

I have heard it argued as a serious complaint against the traditional, conventional use of the masculine as a common gender in English that children do not understand it. Statistics have even been gathered to support the probable reality.²³ But were we to limit the resources of language to what children understand, we would have to do away with a great deal more than the use of singular personal-pronoun references to indefinites. If children do not understand the traditional system, they will grow up in language usage. If college freshman do not understand the usage, we must explain it to them. Of course it is irresponsible to tell a freshman class that no one ever says everyone/they. But it is just as irresponsible not to inform students that many careful writers have traditionally preferred everyone/he. And what would be the status of the dangling modifier or the apostrophe if we were to use the usage of college freshmen, to say nothing of children,

as our standard of excellence? We hardly want to throw over every literary nicety that is not the natural idiom of the untutored.

Yet the N.C.T.E. guidelines for non-sexist language, despite their claim not to offer a new dogmatism, seem to require a radical overthrow of traditional grammar. Indeed the editors of N.C.T.E. publications seem even to have been empowered to decide for authors what is and what is not sexist language.²⁴ Entirely contradictory in spirit to that other notorious N.C.T.E. document, on the student's right to his own language, the new guidelines have inundated the pages of College English with barbarisms, including the unpronounceable and therefore peculiarly offensive s/he, but have ushered in no compensating millennium of sexual equity. Rational arguments in lucid prose are more likely to improve the relations of the sexes than word counts of she or he's in learned journals. And editorial practices that change style for the worse are only unprofessional bullying.

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Notes

¹Julia P. Stanley, "Gender Marking in American English: Usage and Reference," Sexism and Language, [eds.] Alleen Pace Nilsen et al. (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977), p. 69.

²Ann Bodine, "Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar: singular 'they', sex-definite 'he', and 'he or she,'" Language in Society, 4 (1975), 136.

³Alleen Pace Nilsen, "Sexism as Shown through the English Vocabulary," Sexism and Language, pp. 34-41.

⁴Dwight Bolinger, Aspects of Language (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968), p. 112. See also Robin Lakoff, "You Are What You Say," Ms. (July 1974), pp. 63-67. And Mamie Meredith, "'Doctresses', 'Authoresses', and Others," American Speech, 5, 6 (August 1930), 476-481.

⁵Casey Miller and Kate Swift, Words and Women (Garden City: Anchor, 1976), p. 157.

⁶E. Bagby Atwood, "The Pronunciation of 'Mrs.,'" American Speech, 25, 10-18.

⁷Edmund Miller, "Name Reference," The Missouri English Bulletin, 28, 4 (October 1971), 20-24.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Elvira M. Townsend and Mary [Ritchie] Key, "Names and Titles," Latin American Courtesy ([Mexico City ?]: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1961), pp. 25-27.

¹⁰Mary Ritchie Key, Male/Female Language: With a Comprehensive Bibliography (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1975), p. 42.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 42, 89.

¹²John Lyons, Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 286-288. Otto Jasperson, The Philosophy of Grammar (New York: Norton, 1924), p. 230.

¹³Stanley, p. 74.

¹⁴Cf. A. Meillet, "Le Genre féminin dans les langues indo-européennes," Journal de Psychologie: Normale et Pathologique, 20 (1923), 943-944.

¹⁵E.g. Key, Male/Female Language, p. 41. H. Lee Gershuny, "Sexism in Dictionaries and Texts: Omissions and Commissions," Sexism and Language, p. 155.

¹⁶Mary Ritchie Key, "The Role of Male and Female in Children's Books," Wilson Library Bulletin, 46, 6 (October 1971), 167-176.

¹⁷Cf. George L. Musacchio, "Milton's feminine pronouns with neuter antecedents," Journal of English Linguistics, 2 (March 1968), 23-28. Lee H. Gershuny, "Sexism in the Language of Literature," Sexism and Language, pp. 107-129.

¹⁸T. Hilding Svertengren, "The use of feminine gender for inanimate things in American colloquial speech," Moderna Språk, 48 (1954), 261-292. George S. Curme, English Grammar (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1947), pp. 212-213.

¹⁹Dorothy L. Sayers, The Nine Tailors (1934; New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1962), p. 16.

²⁰John Franklin Bardin, chapter v, The Last of Philip Banter (1947), in The John Franklin Bardin Omnibus (Clinton: Penguin, 1976), p. 393.

²¹Ibid., p 396.

²²Robin Lakoff, "Language and woman's place," Language in Society, 21, 1 (April 1973), 45-80.

²³Alleen Pace Nilsen, "Sexism in Children's Books and Elementary Classroom Materials," Sexism and Language, p. 165.

²⁴"Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications," Sexism and Language, pp. 181-191.